PLAYGROUND SAFETY

Each year, over 200,000 children are injured on the nation's playgrounds. 148,000 of these injuries involve playground equipment, and most are the result of falls. Here are some easy steps you can take to make sure the child in your care is safe when playing at a park or home playground:

1. **Make sure adult supervision is present at the playground.**
   More than 40 percent of playground injuries may be in some way related to inadequate supervision. Adults need to watch for potential hazards, observe children playing, intercede and facilitate play when necessary and be available in case an injury occurs.
2. **Guide children to play on age-appropriate equipment.**
   Children are developmentally different. Therefore, equipment designed for children ages 5 to 12 is too big for children ages 2 to 5. Different playing areas for each of the age groups should be available and children should only play on their age-appropriate equipment.
3. **Survey the play area and make sure it is free of apparent hazards.**
   Visually survey the area and check to see that there are no apparent immediate hazards. Hazards range from broken glass or metal pieces lying around to playground design that creates congestion among the play equipment where children could collide or fall on each other. If the area is near a street or parking lot, make sure there is fencing to prevent the children from running in front of cars. Look for signs designating the separate play areas for 2 to 5 and 5 to 12 year olds. Be sure that metal equipment is in shaded areas or has a protective surface to prevent burns.
4. **Check the playground surface for cushioned surfacing beneath equipment and its fall areas.**
   Falls to surfaces are responsible for more than 70 percent of the injuries sustained on playgrounds. Improper surfacing is the leading cause of many of those injuries. Hard surfaces such as asphalt, blacktop, concrete, grass, packed dirt or rocks should not be used. A fall to those surfaces could be life threatening. Acceptable surfaces include hardwood fiber/mulch, pea gravel and sand. Other options include synthetic surfaces such as rubber tiles, mats or poured surfaces.

   Surfaces should be maintained to a depth proportionate to the height of equipment. A good guideline would be to use 12-inches of loose fill, such as mulch, pea gravel or sand, for equipment up to eight feet in height. Manufacturers of synthetic surfaces should make recommendations of the depth of their products depending on equipment height.

5. **Examine equipment such as ladders, platforms and steps.**
   Climbers and monkey bars are popular equipment that promote strength

and coordination skills. However, they also have the highest incidence of injury on public playgrounds and need to be closely supervised. Check to see if steps on climbers are in good condition and that handrails have appropriate grip sizes for children.

If the climber has a platform, it should be surrounded with a guardrail or protective barrier. The choice of protection depends on the age level of children using the equipment and the height of the platform. For platforms for younger children, the guardrails and protective barriers should be at least 29" high; for school-aged children, the barriers should be at least 38" high.

6. **Survey types and quality of swings.**
   Swings also are favorite equipment that need close observation. They are the pieces of moving equipment that are most likely to cause injuries. For preventative measures, the following changes are suggested: remove animal swings; remove metal or wooden seats and replace with soft seats; make sure swings are on a separate framework rather than attached to other equipment.

   Only two swings should be placed in each bay (or framework) that supports the swings. Swings should be positioned at least 24" apart at the base of the seats and 30" from any supports.

   Swings should have a fall zone that is twice the height of the pivot or swing hanger in front and in back of the swing seats. For example, if the hanger pivot height is 10 feet, the fall zone must be 20 feet in front and 20 feet in back of the swing seat. The fall zone also should extend six feet to each side of the support structure.

7. **Check out the slides.** Slides should be well anchored, have firm handrails for gripping and steps with good traction. Steps should have drainage holes to make them less slippery. There should be no spaces between the slide platform and the slide bed where strings from clothing could catch and cause strangulation. Make sure metal slides are shaded or covered to prevent burns in hot sun.
8. **Review the seesaw area.**
   Make sure the handles of the seesaw are secure and of a size and design that children can grip easily. Check to see if there is a soft bumper under the bottom of the seat to cushion the hit to the surface and that all pivot points are covered to prevent pinched fingers.
9. **Inspect the action of merry-go-rounds.**
   Merry-go-rounds should be firmly anchored into the ground and have handles for children to grasp easily. The surface under the bed of the merry-go-round should be positioned so that children cannot slide underneath. The gear box should be covered so fingers cannot get

caught. Finally, a governor should be attached to control the ultimate speed of the unit.

10. **Be a good neighbor.**
    Be sure to leave the area in as good a condition as you found it (or better, if you have spotted problems). Have the children help you redistribute any loose surfacing that may have been pushed aside by play back under swings and the bottom of slides. Close any gates that may be open.

If you have found problems that you have not been able to handle yourself, contact the administrator of the play area to suggest changes and point out problems. If an injury occurred, make sure to contact the administrator of the play area and report the injury, the condition of the play area at the time, and any factors that may have been related to the incident.